Economic Development and Revolutionary Political Action: A Critical Assessment of the Marxist Debate on the 'Collapse' of Capitalism

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The problem of the link between economic development and revolutionary political action has been present since the beginning of Marxist theory. The so-called debate on the "collapse" of capitalism – carried out between the end of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century – was probably one of the debates in which this question played the most prominent role. The purpose of this chapter is to carry out a critical reconstruction of this controversy by focusing our attention precisely on how each of the positions conceived the link between capitalist economic development and revolutionary action. With this I seek not only to reevaluate this debate from a perspective that has been little analyzed so far, but also and fundamentally, to provide an alternative to the unresolved dilemma in which this controversy ended: I am referring essentially to the mutual accusation of falling into a position that is either "economistic", or "voluntarist", with respect to the overcoming of capitalism. As I will try to show, this unresolved dilemma in which the controversy ended is basically explained by the underlying methodological deficiencies behind the disputed positions. More specifically, by the inability to recognize the unity of economic and political phenomena as a unity of content and form.

In contrast, I suggest that the key to overcoming this limitation is to make a methodologically grounded reading of Marx's critique of political economy. This methodological approach is inspired by the research programme opened by the so-called Neue Marx-Lektüre, which originated in Germany in the 1970s and was then continued in the Anglo-Saxon world by the so-called "new dialectic" from the 1990s onwards. These currents made significant progress in identifying the method behind Marx's critique of political economy and drew attention to its relevance to understanding the foundations of that critique. However, it can be said that this research programme never succeeded in making progress to the point of examining the link between political action and economic determination at the very moment of the overcoming of capitalism. For this reason, at this point I recover for my critique a recent line of research in the specialized literature that, from a perspective that is also based on the method that underlies Marx's critique, has been especially concerned with specifying the link between economic and political relations in capitalist society.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the following four sections, a critical reconstruction of the debate in question is made, distinguishing the different stages through which it passed until its conclusion in the mid-1930s. In the following two sections, an assessment of the debate is made in the light of the method that underpins the Marxian critique of political economy, the advances in this regard in the recent literature are evaluated, and an alternative solution is offered on the basis of a particular line of research. Finally, the last section presents the main conclusions of the chapter.

The Debate on the Fate of Capitalism in Russia (1882-1899)

The controversy over the "collapse" of capitalism gets its name from the round of debates that took place within German social democracy in the years 1898-1899 (Colletti, 1978). However, contrary to what is usually believed (Sweezy, 1973; Marramao, 1976; Krätke, 2016), this is not its origin or its most decisive and fruitful source. In fact, as Jacoby (1975) warned, the real starting point of this controversy is to be found a few years earlier, in the context of the Russian debate on the development of capitalism in tsarist Russia. Indeed, as we shall see at once, it was not only the first theory of the collapse of capitalism based on the Marxian critique of political economy that emerged, but also the very terms that structured the later and better-known controversies.

The debate on the development of capitalism in Russia goes back at least to the origin of Russian populism in the mid-nineteenth century (Venturi, 1981; Walicki, 1971). However, it was not until this intellectual tradition intersected with the nascent Russian Marxism that this debate took shape and a real diffusion (Von Laue, 1954; Walicki, 1971). In essence, what the Russian populists were debating was whether capitalism could develop in Russia in the same way as it had in the West and, more provocatively, whether, because of the existence of a peculiar "rural commune" it was possible to avoid the passage through capitalism in order to achieve a socialist society. As Zasulich presented it to Marx himself, the question posed to the Populists was the following: either "either this rural commune" was "capable of developing by socialist means" or, "on the contrary, the commune is destined to perish" and it remains only "to ascertain in how many decades capitalism in Russia will have a development similar to that of Europe" (Zasulich, 1980: 29).

The first populist attempt to elucidate this question on a scientific basis of Marxist inspiration was made by Vorontsov in a series of articles finally published in his book The Fate of Capitalism in Russia (Vorontsov, 1882). This author started from a reading of the Marxian critique of political economy according to which the development of capitalism in a country was subject to the existence of an ever-expanding market that, therefore, could only be guaranteed by access to the external market. And because it had "entered the path of progress later than others", Russia lacked this access and, consequently, the possibility of developing capitalism internally(Vorontsov, 1882: 274, quoted in Kindersley, 1962: 15). In short, although Vorontsov's argument sought to prove the impossibility of the development of capitalism in Russia, what it first and foremost proved was the unviability of capitalism itself as a mode of production. Although with slight variations, this same explanation of capitalism's historical destiny was quickly adopted by most populists. The most prominent figure among them was Danielson, at the time an assiduous correspondent of Engels and translator of the first two volumes of Capital into Russian. "The creation of surplus value and its realization," Danielson wrote, "are two different things"; that is why "the capitalist will not be able to subsist one day if his trade is limited only to his needs and those of his workers, and the developed capitalist nation will not be able to limit itself to its own internal market" (Danielson, 1902: 252–254).

This line of reasoning was quickly met with severe criticism. But it did not do so so much because of its lack of correspondence with Russian reality but because of its inconsistency with the Marxian explanation of capitalism. In fact, the common starting point of all these criticisms was to defend an interpretation of Marx's work according to which capitalism created its own markets and, consequently, its reproduction did not find such immanent economic limits. Thus was born the first round of the controversy over the collapse of capitalism. The most elaborate criticisms in this regard were those of Lenin (1974d, 1974b, 1974c), Tugan-Baranovsky (2015), and Bulgakov (2015). These authors based the essence of their argument on a reconstruction of the schemes of reproduction of

global social capital that Marx had diagrammed in the third section of the second volume of Capital. In short, the common argument was that since the goal of capitalist production is not the satisfaction of individual consumption but the valorization of value, surplus value is realized through productive consumption that expands the scale of production, which is expressed in the permanent enlarged reproduction of the means of production. Thus, for example, Bulgakov maintained that capitalist production is capable of unlimited growth, despite, or even against, the reduction of consumption [...]. Only Marx offered the analysis of the real link: [...] the increase in production, as we have already pointed out, is limited to the volumes of capital and depends only on them (Bulgakov, 2015: 73).

In more famous readings of this debate, the positions put forward in relation to the development of capitalism are usually linked in a more or less direct way to the more general perspectives adopted by its main spokesmen with respect to political action. Thus, the debate is presented in terms of oppositions such as "populists" versus "legal Marxists," or "reformists" versus "revolutionaries"; for example, in the analyses of Luxemburg (1968a), Rosdolsky (1989), Jacoby (1975). However, the case is much more complex. First, many "populists" were probably much more "Marxist" than the so-called "legal Marxists"; for example, Danielson in relation to Tugan-Baranovsky. Secondly, and decisively for the purposes of this chapter, it is important to note that the two positions under discussion are not linked respectively to "reformist" or "revolutionary" conceptions of the transformation of society, much less to conceptions that affirm or question the need for the supersession of capitalism. First of all, for the populists, the diagnosis that capitalism could not reproduce itself certainly indicated the possibility of the development of the "peasant economy," but in no case the form—reformist or revolutionary—in which this development should be carried out. More expressive of this disconnect between the conception of economic development tand the form of political action that was proposed is the case of the critics of the populists. The point is obvious if we consider that authors as politically opposed as Tugan-Baranovsky and Lenin shared the same diagnosis regarding the purely economic capacity of capitalism to develop and the need to overcome this mode of production. In fact, neither the "reformist" conception of one nor the "revolutionary" conception of the other was linked to his diagnosis of capitalism as an economically self-sufficient mode of production that nevertheless had to be overcome. In the case of Lenin, this disconnection is so manifest that, as he himself explicitly indicated in his famous What Is To Be Done?, there is no way for the purely economic reproduction of capitalism to emerge the "socialist consciousness" that will revolutionize society; hence it was necessary to provide this awareness "from the outside" of this reproduction (Lenin, 1976: 391). At best, as Lenin observed in the context of the debate we are discussing, the economic contradiction that underlies the development of capitalism, that is, "the contradiction between the social character of production and the individual character of appropriation," could make it "easier [...] to find a way out" of this mode of production, but not to subvert it by itself (Lenin, 1974e: 164, italics in original).

At this point, and by way of conclusion to the analysis of this first debate on the "collapse" of capitalism, it can be argued that although the controversy begins by focusing on the implications for political action of the conception adopted with respect to the economic development of capitalism, the result of the debate is that, In any of the positions that are presented, the connection between economic development and political action ends up being shown to be extremely weak, if not directly null. In other words: in no case does political action follow as an immanent necessity of economic development.

The Debate on the "Collapse Theory" in German Social Democracy (1898-1902)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Germany was clearly one of the most advanced "capitalist" nations. Consequently, the discussion among Marxists did not involve the development of capitalism in a supposedly "pre-capitalist" society but the way in which the already dominant capitalism evolved. More precisely, the question was to evaluate whether the evolution of capitalism coincided with the general tendencies presented by Marx in Capital. The different conceptions that were forged in this regard in those years gave rise to what was called the "revisionist debate" (Tudor and Tudor, 1988). In essence, this debate pitted Marxists who proposed revising and correcting Marx's conceptions of the evolution of capitalism against Marxists who sought to defend them to the letter. In this context, the question of the "collapse" of capitalism was, if not the very axis of this controversy – as Colletti (1975: 81) suggests – certainly one of the most widely and passionately discussed points. Let's consider the most relevant positions.

The first to raise this question was Eduard Bernstein, founder and greatest representative of the "revisionist" position. According to this author, among Marxists there was a fatalistic conception of the overcoming of capitalism whose axis was the catastrophic collapse of the system caused by an insurmountable economic crisis. Bernstein, on the other hand, found that "a total and practically simultaneous collapse of the present system of production did not become more likely, but more unlikely, due to the progressive development of society" (Bernstein, 1982: 74). The responses from the so-called "orthodox Marxists" were not long in coming.

According to Luxemburg, Bernstein's critique did not simply question the idea of the catastrophic collapse of capitalism but also the set of premises that underpin the need for socialism. In this sense, this author's response aimed both to defend the existence of a collapse of capitalism and to specify the conditions that lead to socialism, instead of falling into an irreproducible social situation. "First and foremost," Luxemburg argued, "the growing anarchy of the capitalist economy . . . it turns its fall into an inevitable result"; hence it is necessary to wait for a "moment when [capitalism] collapses - and becomes simply impossible." But in addition, parallel to this "growing anarchy" is developing, on the one hand, the "socialization of the production process" and, on the other, "the growing class power and knowledge of the proletariat", that is, two conditions without which, even after the collapse, socialism could not develop (Luxemburg, 2010: 105). His fundamental point was that Bernstein, by denying the collapse, ended up denying these two conditions as well. In the first case, because the "socialization of the production process" was reduced to its "capitalist form"; and in the second, because "the class consciousness of the proletariat" was no longer the "intellectual reflection of the increasingly acute contradictions of capitalism and its imminent fall [...] but a mere ideal" (Luxemburg, 2010: 107). In this way, Luxemburg's argument seemed to link the collapse of capitalism with revolutionary political action, and the negation of capitalism with reformist political action. Leaving aside his moderation, Kautsky's answer was not very different from Luxemburg's: "[The] capitalist form of production," he argued, "becomes impossible from the moment when the market does not expand to the extent that production, that is, from the moment that excess production becomes chronic" (Kautsky, 1966: 181-182). Then, as in Luxemburg, Kautsky's argument included the class struggle to take the step to socialism that the economic development of capitalism itself was incapable of making. In his case, however, the development of the class struggle was not so much based on the "anarchy of production" as on the growing relative "misery" of the working class (Kautsky, 1966: 150 ff.). That is why, in his presentation, the connection between collapse and class struggle appeared weaker than in Luxembourg. To such an extent that, according to Kautsky, the class struggle could cause the fall of capitalism even "before" a situation of terminal

economic crisis arose (Kautsky, 1966: 185-186).

The next step in the German debate came just two years later, with the publication of the German translation of the second edition of Tugan-Baranovsky's book on industrial crises in England. The main arguments of this book were the same as those of its first edition in 1894, when the author polemicized with Marxist populists; In short: capitalism was a self-sufficient mode of production and lacked any immanent limits. But between one edition and another the third volume of Capital had come to light, and Tugan-Baranovsky had become acritical of Marx, in particular of the explanation of crises offered in this last volume. According to Tugan-Baranovsky, Marx and at the time the Marxists, considered that due to its pure economic dynamics, capitalism must necessarily reach a point where it could not reproduce itself and that this demonstrated the inevitable necessity of socialism. "Marx believed," Tugan-Baranovsky asserted, that once a certain stage of development had been reached, capitalist society could no longer subsist. Its transformation into a socialist society would then have an economic necessity. […]. Our analysis of the conditions for the realization of the social product has shown us the weakness of this point of view (Tugan-Baranovsky, 2000).

The reaction against Tugan-Baranovsky's book was immediate. At this point, Marxists formed a common front, assuming that in Marx there was a theory of collapse and that it had to be defended to the letter because without it there was no possible explanation for the overcoming of capitalism (Schmidt, 1978; Kautsky, 1978; Boudin, 1920).1 However, even in the most elaborate responses, the Marxists did not advance in their argument much further than they had in the debate with Bernstein. With respect to the connection between collapse and political action, similar arguments were also repeated, although this time wielded by different authors. For example, Kautsky took a position closer to that of Luxemburg in the previous debate, arguing that, in the face of the terminal crisis, the working class "is forced to seek a way out of widespread misery, and it can only find it in socialism", although he was still confident that such a dilemma could be avoided if the working class conquered power "in time to give (present) economic development another direction" (Kautsky, 1978: 233). While Schimdt placed more emphasis on the fact that the working class had to conquer political power before the crisis, because in a catastrophic "social environment" "economic reforms of socialist tendencies" could achieve "very little" (Schmidt, 1978: 185).

Let us consider the balance of the German debate regarding the link between economic development and political action. At first glance it would seem that with the appearance of Tugan-Baranovsky's book, the anti-collapseist position is definitively linked to reformist political action and revisionism. As we have seen, these associations are common in the classic readings of these debates. However, here too the case is more complex than it seems. In fact, we have already seen that in Tugan-Baranovsky the need for reformist political action does not arise from the fact that capitalism is a self-sufficient mode of production. On the other hand, if one examines it carefully, in Bernstein's argument too, reformist action does not arise from capitalism's capacity for adaptation. And the case is no different on the side of the so-called "collapsers". In Kautsky and Schmidt the disconnect between economic development and political action is clearly and unequivocally presented in the fact that the working class has to "anticipate" the situation of terminal crisis and, therefore, the eventual character of its political action cannot be at all connected with such a final fate of capitalism. In Luxemburg, although in the face of the inexorable tendency of capitalism towards its collapse, reformist political action has no reason to exist or, rather, is necessarily impotent, nothing tells us that the anarchy of production, more or less acute, will motivate action of a

[1] The most significant exception was Hilferding; in his famous work Finance Capital recovered, albeit with reservations, the Tugan-Baranovsky approach to explaining crises (Hilferding, 1963: 274 n.; 316 n.; 317 n.; 321)

revolutionary character. On this point, in fact, Luxemburg's argument does not go beyond the classical argument of Social Democracy according to which revolutionary political action springs from the growing misery of the working class. In conclusion, despite the fact that different arguments were presented, the result of the German debate is not far from that left by the Russian debate: the connection between collapse and political action does not reach an immanent character here either; that is to say, economic development does not imply the necessity of existence or the form of political action of the working class.

The Luxembourg Debate (1913-1924)

The most important response that Tugan-Baranovsky's book was to receive came a few years later with the appearance of Luxemburg's best-known book: The Accumulation of Capital (Luxembourg, 1968a). Despite the length and thoroughness of her exposition, this author's argument was quite simple. As he postulated, the main problem to be resolved in the discussion on the fate of capitalism was "where the constantly growing demand on which the progressive expansion of production is based came from" (Luxemburg, 1968a: 107). He then suggested that this demand could only come from "a circle of purchasers who are outside capitalist society" (Luxemburg, 1968a: 317). Under this dynamic, Luxemburg concluded, the accumulation of capital reaches a "dead end" and becomes "impossible", and "the impossibility of accumulation means, in capitalist production, the impossibility of the further development of the productive forces, and, with it, the objective historical necessity of the collapse [Untergangs] of capitalism" (Luxemburg, 1968a: 384-385). In this context, and in line with her argument in the debate with Bernstein, this author pointed out that socialism could only be the result of the revolutionary political action of the working class that anticipates the collapse of the system (Luxemburg, 1968a: 345).

With few exceptions, the reception of Luxembourg's book was absolutely negative (Gaido & Quiroga, 2013; Krätke, 2016). In Germany, "revisionist" authors such as Schmidt (1915), "centrists" such as Eckstein (2012) and Bauer (1978), and even "leftist" authors such as Pannekoek (2012) criticized the work relentlessly. And in Russia, Lenin's ruling (1968, 1977b, 1977a: 181-182), the Bolsheviks were also quick to dismiss it. In essence, all these criticisms were aimed at defending an interpretation of Marx's explanation of the dynamics of capital accumulation where there were no limits to the realization of surplus value. In short: they aimed to deny the existence of a collapse of capitalism motivated by a purely economic dynamic. In relation to the connection between economic development and political action, Luxembourg's critics did not innovate with respect to previous instances of the debate. Even more striking is that, coming from such diverse political positions, these critics ended up presenting very similar positions in relation to this connection. Let us consider in particular the two criticisms which became in the course of the debate in the "official" responses to the Luxemburgist approach given by the German Social Democracy (Bauer, 1978) and by the Bolsheviks (Bukharin, 1974), respectively, and which are otherwise expressions of openly opposed political positions.

With regard to the question of the overcoming of capitalism, the answer of German Social Democracy is limited to recovering its line of historical argumentation present since the Erfurt Kautsky programme (1910) and is then used by Kautsky in his reply to Bernstein. In short, the working class will react to its increasingly impoverished conditions by seizing political power from the state and imposing socialism. "Capitalism," said Bauer, "will not fail because of the mechanical impossibility of realizing surplus-value. It will succumb, instead, to the rebellion towards which it impels the masses of the people" (Bauer, 1978: 363). At first glance, it may be striking that Bauer can

recover this line of argument by taking a position contrary to the theory of the collapse of capitalism, since as will be remembered, this anti-collapse position was the one held by the "revisionists" and Kautsky's contenders. However, Bauer is able to carry out this operation precisely because, as we have also seen, in this line of argument the connection between collapse and revolutionary political action of the working class is extremely weak.2 On the part of the Bolsheviks the answer is not very different. In essence, this critique involves presenting imperialist war as the cause of misery and, in turn, of the rebellion of the working class against capitalism. "Today we are already in a position to allow ourselves to pass judgment on the process of capitalist collapse that is no longer based simply on abstract constructions and theoretical perspectives. The collapse of capitalism has begun," Bukharin maintained. "The revolutionization of the proletariat undoubtedly had to do with economic ruin, economic ruin with war, war with the [...] imperialist policy in general" (Bukharin, 1974: 129-130). In short, as in the case of the German Social Democrats, for Bukharin the revolutionary political action of the working class, and consequently the overcoming of capitalism, arose from the increasingly miserable conditions to which the working class is subjected in this mode of production.

Written in 1915 and published posthumously in 1921, Luxemburg's response to his critics—popularly known as the Anti-Criticism—essentially repeats the same arguments as his original work (Luxemburg, 1968b). What is interesting about this response, as Jacoby (1975) acutely observes, is that here Luxembourg defends itself particularly against the accusation of economism and mechanism. At this point, the defense of this author is to maintain that the economic tendency towards the collapse of capitalism does not in itself lead to socialism; that what is needed first of all is the revolutionary political action of the working class and, more precisely, that this action be carried out — before such a collapse actually occurs — motivated by an increasingly unsustainable economic situation. "The objective tendency of capitalist evolution towards such an outcome," Luxemburg maintained, "is sufficient to produce much sooner such a social and political sharpening of the opposing forces that it will have to put an end to the dominant system" (Luxemburg, 1968b: 470). On closer examination, Luxemburg's argument regarding the link between the collapse and revolutionary political action is not very different from the one she put forward in her debate against Bernstein. The interesting thing about this new presentation is not only that it is much more precise than the previous one, but that it takes place in a context of accusation of "economism" and "mechanism" that forces us to account for the precise link between economic development and political action. In this sense, it can be said that Luxemburg's argument responds convincingly to the accusation of his critics by including the political action of the working class as a necessary moment for the overcoming of capitalism. However, the connection of this action with economic development remains extremely weak and, in essence, of the same nature as the connection presented by its critics: the critical economic situation, which develops by itself, motivates revolutionary action by making visible the miserable state in which the working class finds itself. In other words, it is not that the economic process itself needs the revolutionary political action of the working class to develop, but that on the one hand there is economic development and on the other hand the revolutionary political action that opposes it.3

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[2] Likewise, by the way, this is the basis on which the post-war Kautsky will be able to radically change his position on the collapse of capitalism without modifying his general conception of the link between economic and political relations (Kautsky, 1988: 424-456)

[3] In this sense, it does not seem accidental that the famous phrase "socialism or barbarism" with which Luxemburg's approach to collapse is recalled did not belong to Engels, as this author thought (Luxemburg, 2008: 278), but to Kautsky, whose approach was presented at the antipodes of Luxemburg's (Angus, 2015).

In short, if we consider how the question of the link between economic development and political action is presented, at this stage of the debate we again find results similar to those we arrived at in previous sessions. But now the scenario is more clearly defined. Not only did neither of the two disputed positions come to present an immanent connection between economic development and political action, but both positions ended up presenting exactly the same external connection: on the one hand there is economic development which leads itself to a critical situation; on the other hand there is the working class which reacts to this situation.

The Grossmann Debate (1929-1934)

The last throes of the debate on the collapse took place on the occasion of the publication of Grossmann's book The Law of Accumulation and the Collapse of the Capitalist System (Grossmann, 1979).4 According to this author, the accumulation of capital carries with it the tendency towards its own collapse; but it does not do so because of a problem of the "realization" of surplus value, as the adherents of the theory of collapse had hitherto maintained, but because of the "lack" of surplus value to satisfy the needs of the pursuit of capital accumulation itself. At a certain point, Grossmann concludes, "the capitalists will have to feed on the air [...] the system suffers a collapse, the crisis of the system that ensues in this way expresses the collapse of that of valorization" (Grossmann, 1979: 83). What explains this collapse, as he specifies later, is that accumulation "develops on the basis of a progressively increasing organic composition of capital", so that the surplus value produced, even with a growing population, "always increases less than capital" (Grossmann, 1979: 120).

What is interesting about Grossmann's approach is not only that he takes the focus of analysis away from the collapse of the problem of the realization of surplus value (Shaikh, 1978: 236), but also that he ends up changing the perspective of the link between economic development and political action from the dilemma of "reformism" or "revolution" to that of "economism" or "voluntarism". In effect, what underlies the entire presentation of this author is a critique of the previous collapseist conception as a "fatalist" or "economistic" conception. In particular, Grossmann disputes Luxemburg's position in that it "implicitly [...] the idea of a final limit point of capitalism [which is] irreconcilable with the Marxian conception of class struggle" and which therefore "can well be qualified as a relapse into quietist fatalism, by virtue of which there is no place for class struggle" (Grossmann, 1979: 19-20). Grossmann's main argument on this point is that the overcoming of capitalism will not happen without the active participation of the working class, but not simply because the working class is the one that will ultimately have to take into its hands the conscious organization of the process of social production, but in particular because the moment of collapse will depend on the mass of available surplus value. which in turn depends on the class struggle. Thus, towards the end of his book he points out that the "irruption" of the collapse is in reality, and within certain limits, subject to the influence of conscious confrontations of the two classes considered. […]. The struggle of the working class for its daily demands is thus linked to its struggle for the final goal. The final objective for which the working class fights is therefore not an ideal introduced 'from the outside' into the workers' movement (Grossmann, 1979: 388-389).

Grossmann's contribution was quickly and widely discussed in various circles of Marxism.

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[4] Frtiz Sternberg's influential work Imperialism (1979) is left aside here, insofar as, on the one hand, it does not advance substantively in the arguments that Luxemburg had presented in his Accumulation of Capital, and on the other, it is quickly displaced in the debate by the appearance of the aforementioned work by Grossmann.

However, with few exceptions, it was harshly criticized. In essence, all these criticisms involved objecting to Grossmann's argument about the rigidity of the variables that make up his model (Howard & King, 1988; R. Kuhn, 2004). In relation to the link between economic development and political action, Grossmann's approach was especially discussed by the "left communists". The main contributions were those of Korsch (1978a, 1978b), Pannekoek (1978) and Mattick (1934, 1978a, 1978b). Let us consider them succinctly.

Korsch criticized Grossmann for falling back into an "objectivist" interpretative line of the course of capitalist society, which as such is not "capable of providing the serious guarantee of the conscious action of the proletarian class in struggle for its own goals" (Korsch, 1978a: 130). In short, Korsch sought to apply to Grossmann the same criticism that Grossmann applied to Luxemburg, namely, that his theory left no room for class struggle. To this position, and trying not to fall into what according to this author would be the opposite extreme of "subjectivism", he opposed "an authentically materialist position" according to which the terminal crisis had the role of the "Sorelian" myth for the practical action of the working class, that is, it only made sense insofar as it motivated revolutionary political action (Korsch, 1978a: 130). For his part, Pannekoek's criticism was in the same vein. According to this author, Grossmann explains the collapse of capitalism "without there being a revolutionary class to fight and defeat the bourgeoisie" (Pannekoek, 1978: 70). But unlike Korsch, this author presented, with regard to the overcoming of capitalism, a position that sought to preserve the real economic determination of the political action of the working class: he presented the manifestations of the economic crisis by determining the will of the proletariat. "Socialism," said this author, "does not come because capitalism collapses economically[...] it comes because capitalism, as it lives and grows, becomes more and more unbearable for the workers and throws them into struggle" (Pannekoek, 1978: 80-81). In contrast, Mattick's contributions sought to defend Grossmann's arguments. First of all, Mattick rejected "any mechanical conception of the collapse of capital" as seeing only one aspect of the "dialectical process" (Mattick, 1978a: 134), and defended Grossmann for "limiting himself for methodological reasons, in his analysis of the law of accumulation, to the definition of merely economic assumptions." Thus, according to this author, Grossmann "did not hold a 'purely economic' point of view, but a dialectical one, for which all abstraction is only a means for the recognition of reality" (Mattick, 1978b: 86-87). Consequently, according to Mattick, it had to be considered that "the deadly crisis of capitalism does not mean that the system commits suicide, but that the class struggle assumes forms that lead to the overthrow of the system" (Mattick, 1934: 20). However, as for the concrete connection between economic development and political action, this author's position departed—although without realizing it—from Grossmann's approach. For Mattick, in fact, the revolutionary struggle of the working class for the overcoming of capitalism was finally explained by the impoverishment suffered by this class as a result of the deadly crisis of the system. It is not until the moment that "capital can continue to exist only on the basis of the absolute and continuous impoverishment of the masses," Mattick affirmed, "when this economic struggle is disrupted, whether this turns out to be conscious or not for the masses, in political struggle" (Mattick, 1978b: 105).

Let us consider the contrasts in relation to the link between economic development and political action left by this last instance of the debate. At first glance it seems that the positions range from an economistic extreme represented by Grossmann, to another voluntarist extreme represented by Korsch, passing through intermediate positions represented by Pannekoek and Mattick. However, on closer examination of the positions, we see that they have more in common than meets the eye. In the case of Grossmann, although capitalism cannot be overcome without the existence of economic collapse and in this sense can be described as "economistic", the revolutionary political action of the working class that carries out such an overcoming arises only in "reaction" to the

effective or imminent collapse of the system. Thus, as in the "voluntarist" approach, in Grossmann's argumentation the revolutionary political action of the working class arises simply as an affirmation of human free will against the oppressive movement of capital. Moreover, even in the case of trade union political action, which is explicitly presented as the subjective factor in the collapse of capitalism, it is a political action equally alien to economic development insofar as its power to impose the mass of surplus value that determines the moment of collapse, it does not arise from the very dynamics of capital accumulation but from the mere class struggle. In this sense, Korsch's conception of the link between economic development and political action is exactly the same. In his argument, revolutionary political action also arises outside the development of capital accumulation and as a reaction to it, if not because of the economic situation of crisis that feeds the myth of collapse. And this same disconnection is most evident in the positions of Pannekoek and Mattick insofar as they do not depart essentially from the more traditional Marxist positions. In short, all these approaches can be interpreted equally as "voluntarist", in the sense that revolutionary action springs from outside economic development, or as "economistic", in the sense that what determines the destiny of capitalism is not the revolutionary political action of the working class but economic development. Consequently, behind the apparent opposition between "economism" and "voluntarism" what underlies is the same conception regarding the link between economic development and political action that has been present since the beginning of the debate: on the one hand there is economic development and on the other hand the revolutionary political actionof the working class that opposes it.

A methodological critique and the limits of the "new dialectic" approach

In the course of our analysis of the controversy over the collapse of capitalism, we have seen that, in spite of the mutual accusations levelled by the contenders, the positions adopted in the face of the "collapse" do not result in either a disposition to revolutionary or reformist political action, or the adoption of an economistic or voluntarist conception of the course of social life. As we have tried to show in each instance of the debate, what enables these disconnections is the conception of the link between economic development and political action as an external link. This conception, in fact, underlies all the positions because, as can now be seen, they all share the same basic argument: political action that goes beyond capitalism – whether reformist or revolutionary – arises as a reaction to a critical economic situation, be it "exploitation" and "misery", or "crisis" or the "distribution of wealth". Here the concrete economic situation always presents itself as the product of the process of capital accumulation conceived as an exclusively economic phenomenon that develops by itself, that is, abstracted from all political mediation. In turn, and as a counterpart, the political action of the working class that necessarily overcomes capitalism is presented as a phenomenon alien to the accumulation of capital and whose reason for existence is thus indefinite. In short, economic development and political action are presented in an external link because in all cases they are conceived from the beginning as self-constituted phenomena prior to their relationship. Carried out on the basis of this common conception, it should come as no surprise that the debate has not produced conclusive results and has rather simply been diluted. First of all, if one starts by extirpating a phenomenon from the unity that constitutes it as such, it inevitably becomes an abstraction. But there is also no way of restoring the unity in question once it has been intended to develop by itself what has been extirpated from it. That is why the project of answering for the overcoming of capitalism by breaking the unity that constitutes capitalism itself as a mode of production of human life was doomed to failure from the beginning. This way of proceeding, however, is completely alien to Marx's method, which is precisely characterized by grasping unity in difference.

The conclusion that the limitations of the controversy over the collapse arise from the methodological shortcomings that are implicit in the conceptions in dispute was noted by Marramao (1982) at the end of the 1970s. This author considered that if Marx's critique of political economy was conceived as a critique of the objective forms of social relations as well as of the "reified forms of consciousness", the dialectical method of "exposition" developed by Marx must necessarily lead to a "scientific" explanation of class consciousness and of the overcoming of capitalism (Marramao, 1982: 140-141). In this way, Marramao concluded, "the process of the genesis of Klassenbewusstein [class consciousness] is therefore explained from the process of production-reproduction, from within the objectivity of social relations, [instead of being]presupposed as the result of an irreducible autonomy" (Marramao, 1982: 183). Unfortunately, this author never carried out this research program. However, since then—as Marramao himself already warned—the relevance of the dialectical method for the understanding of Marx's critique of political economy began to become evident in Marxist debates.

The first step in this direction was taken by a group of German Marxists later known by the label Neue Marx-Lektüre (Backhaus, 1978; Reichelt, 2013; Schmidt, 1973). In contrast to traditional research on the dialectical method, generally linked to the understanding of the "great laws" of the existence of material reality (Engels, 1979; Plekhanov, 1964; Lenin, 1974a), this group of authors specialized in investigating the role of the dialectical method in the Marxian critique of political economy. These investigations, however, had two limitations. In the first place, even the most ambitious did not go beyond the first chapters of Capital; and secondly, until several years later they were practically encapsulated in Germany without ever reaching a significant diffusion.5 The project of linking the dialectical method with the Marxian critique of political economy only gained new impetus, greater concreteness, and a truly international scope, with the work of what is now known as the "new dialectic" (Murray, 1988, Smith, 1990; Moseley, 1993; Moseley & Campbell, 1997; Arthur, 2002; Albritton & Simoulidis, 2003; Róbles Báez, 2005; Moseley & Smith, 2014). In general, it can be said that these new investigations found that the plot structure of Capital is organized under a form that finds formal inspiration in the deployment of categories presented in Hegel's Logic. Thus, Marx's exposition is seen as the development of capital from its simplest to its most complex forms, in a movement that is characterized, to paraphrase Marx, as the "reproduction" of the internal life of that object through thought. In turn, to the extent that the passage or transition from one form of capital to another is conceived as springing from the development of the immanent contradictions of each form in question, the links between them are conceived as immanent and necessary, in open opposition to the externality proper to the use of formal logic. In this way, the dialectical method closes the doors to any kind of external connection between the phenomena under study. In concrete terms, this means that, if one is consistent with this method, it is no longer possible to solve the problem of overcoming capitalism by developing, on the one hand, the abstract dynamic of capital accumulation, and on the other hand developing the political action or revolutionary consciousness of the working class. In short, it is no longer possible to present the overcoming of capitalism as a consequence of a "reaction" of the working class to an economic situation outside it.

Specifically in relation to the question of the link between economic development and political action, the most fruitful result of these investigations was the recognition of capital as the alienated subject of capitalist society. Thus, as Robles Báez presented it early on, if one makes a methodologically founded reading of Capital one discovers that "Marx's objective is not only to explain capital as a simple determination of money but, more importantly, to explain capital as

[5] A critical evaluation of the limits of this approach to account for the foundations of the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class can be found in Starosta (2017).

capital, that is, as value as a subject of the capitalist mode of production that constitutes itself by means of its own determinations" (Robles Báez, 1997b: 137). Thus, "the individual 'subjects', workers and capitalists, appear as 'bearers' of this subject because they are 'bearers' of money and commodities as moments of capital" (Robles Báez, 1997a: 3). In other words, if capital is recognized as the general social relation through which the organization of social life is realized, and more specifically as an autonomized social relation that is automatically set in motion, then the action of individuals as members of society no longer appears as a phenomenon external to the economic process of capital accumulation but as a necessary moment of it; or, to put it in the terms in which Marx used to present it, in capitalism individuals "are nothing more than personifications of economic relations as bearers of which [...] confront each other" (Marx, 1999a: 104). In this way, the political action that goes beyond capitalism, insofar as it is an action that takes place in capitalism, must necessarily be explained as a moment in the development of capital. Thus, by affirming that capitalism is overcome by the very dynamics of capital accumulation, it is also affirmed that it is overcome through the political action of the working class. In concrete terms, if one is consistent with the dialectical method and, on this basis, with the recognition of capital as the concrete subject of the unity of social life, there is no way to fall back on either "economism" or "voluntarism".

However, the implications of the adoption of the dialectical method for the question of overcoming capitalism were not addressed by any of the authors referred to. Moreover, in the few cases where the question is raised, we end up going back to the traditional Marxist conception instead of going beyond it. For example, Arthur considers that the revolutionary action of the working class does not fit within the Marxian analysis of capital because there the workers do not appear as "human beings" but only as "bearers" of the movement of capital (Arthur, 2006: 106). Then, this author concludes that we still need to account for how wage labor reproduces itself, and embarks on a self-transcendental trajectory of contestation and overcoming capital, as distinct from a critique of its capitalist exploitation [...] in this sense, my position is close to that of Lebowitz (Arthur, 2006: 106-110).

Another illustrative case of this same type of argumentation is the aforementioned work by Robles Báez. This case is interesting because it occurs in the context of a sharp critique of the approach of "postmodern materialism" where the author resolves in a very convincing way the false dilemma between "structuralism" and "humanism" precisely by presenting individual action as the "carrier" of the movement of capital as a subject of capitalist society. Thus, according to this author, the originality of Marx's critique of political economy is that, by recognizing capital as the subject of capitalist society, it presents individuals as "subjects", as humanism maintains, and at the same time as "non-subjects", as anti-humanist structuralism maintains, thus resolving the false dichotomy presented by both approaches (Robles Báez, 1997a: 10). However, when it comes to addressing the question of the overcoming of capitalism, the action of individuals to overcome their alienation in capital is presented as springing from outside the movement of capital itself, as a struggle between the affirmation of human beings as subjects and their subsumption as bearers of the movement of capital. In his words:

This contradiction will never be resolved as long as capital reigns as the subject of capitalist society and therefore as long as individuals must submit to the imperatives of capital. [...]. Let me illustrate this with the emergence of movements such as women, ethnicities, minorities, races, homosexuals and so on. [...] These movements show that they are experiencing, to a certain extent, the condition of becoming subjects, or of the struggle to be subjects (Robles Báez, 1997a: 20).

In short, despite having recovered the dialectical method to understand the Marxian critique of

political economy and having recognized capital as the subject of capitalist society on that basis, these authors did not develop these results of their research to the point of recognizing the "revolutionary action" of the working class as a necessary moment in the reproduction – and therefore in the overcoming – of capital.

An alternative congruent with the dialectical method and with the foundations of the Marxian critique of political economy

In the light of the Marxist debate on the collapse of capitalism, the challenge of addressing the question of the overcoming of capitalism from the method that underpins the Marxian critique of political economy is to recognize and specify the unity between the development of capital accumulation and the revolutionary political action of the working class. In my opinion, the elucidation of this unity can be found in the recent work of Iñigo Carrera (2008, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), subsequently presented in a broader context of debates by Starosta (2012, 2015, 2017). The limited space of this chapter prevents us from a detailed presentation of the arguments offered by these authors, as well as a more comprehensive discussion of Marx's texts in which the determinations that make up the aforementioned unity between capital accumulation and revolutionary political action are presented. However, in what follows I will restate some fundamental points of this reading of the Marxian critique that allow us to offer an alternative to the positions present in the debate on the "collapse" of capitalism.

First of all, this reading places the determination of consciousness by social being as the starting point of Marx's critique of political economy. In this way, and in line with the reading developed by the "new dialectic", the unfolding of the value form with which this critique begins is recognized as the unveiling of the alienated way in which individuals organize their participation in the process of social life as "personifications" of commodities. In Marx's words, that in this form of society individuals are subject to "a movement of things under whose control they are, instead of controlling them" and that with their "action", they can only confirm "the laws of nature inherent in commodities" (Marx, 1999a: 91; 105-106). In short, as Iñigo Carrera summarizes it, that "the free consciousness and will of the commodity producer" is nothing more than "the way in which the alienation of his consciousness and will as attributes of the commodity is carried out" (2007: 59). From the point of view of the method that underpins Marx's critique of political economy, this recognition of the link between the commodity as a general social relation and consciousness leaves two central conclusions for the investigation of the unity of economic development and the political action of the working class: first, From this moment of dialectical exposition onwards no human action can arise that is not the vehicle for the realization of the movement of the economic relation; Secondly, and consequently, the necessity of the revolutionary action of the working class can only arise from the development of this economic relation in its most concrete forms of existence.

From a "materialist, and therefore scientific" point of view, the only place from which a transformation in the consciousness of a class of individuals can arise, or, as Marx puts it, in "their intellectual representations", is a transformation in "the immediate production process of their existence" (Marx, 1999b: 453 n.). Consequently, according to this approach, in order to explain the need for the development of a consciousness and therefore of revolutionary action, it is necessary to advance in the unfolding of the commodity relation to its form of existence as a vehicle for the development of the productive forces. Marx presents capital as this concrete form of the general social relation in the examination of the forms of production of relative surplus value. Especially in its most powerful form—the "machine system"—we find that the transformations in the subjectivity of the working class pass through the degradation of the worker to the condition of a

"living appendage" of the machinery, as well as through his transformation into a "superfluous population [...] for the self-valorization of capital" (Marx, 1999b: 515-524). At the same time, however, Marx points out that this same transformation in the labour process that cripples the productive subjectivity of the working class entails the production of a "fully developed individual, for whom the various social functions are alternative modes of putting itself into activity" (Marx, 1999b, p. 594). Now, this production of a "fully developed individual" clashes with the production of an individual who cannot control the social powers of his own activity because he is alienated by capital. This contradiction immanent in capitalist production is more fully developed by Marx in his drafts. There, as discussed in length by Starosta (2012), the production of this "fully developed individual" is presented directly as the essential form in which "capital works [...] in favor of its own dissolution" (Marx, 1997: 222). Thus, in contrast to the traditional Marxist view according to which the most general tendency of capital is to degrade the productive subjectivity of the working class, here the tendency to develop in the worker the capacity to control in a fully conscious way his work process, which includes his general social character, is presented as the axis. that is, their participation in the organization of the process of social life. Therefore, what in one case leads to an external link between economic development and revolutionary subjectivity, in the other leads to an immanent link between them.

The last essential point in the discovery of the revolutionary action of the working class as a moment in the development of capital – strictly speaking, already implicit in the previous point – is the recognition of the "absolute contradiction" that exists between the private character of labour on which the form of value is based and the tendency of capital to socialize labour. Although the examination of the process of production of relative surplus-value and of the concentration and centralization of capital already highlights this contradiction, Marx only explicitly presents it in the famous section on the "historical tendency of capitalist accumulation." Here this contradiction is presented in two steps. First, as a contradiction between production based on "the worker's private ownership of his means of production" and capitalist production where the means of production are "socially concentrated." And secondly, as a contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, where "socialization [...] of labor" no longer passes through the expropriation of the "worker who works on his own account," but through the "centralization of capital." Thus, as soon as this socialization clashes by definition with the very private character of labor, "the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor reach a point where they are incompatible with its capitalist crust" (Marx, 2000: 953). And since it is a question of a movement proper to capital, it is not possible here to look for the revolutionary subject anywhere other than in the development of this same movement. For this reason, and in correspondence with the discovery of the development of productive subjectivity capable of taking into its hands the conscious control of social production, Marx presents here the growth of the "rebellion of the working class, a class [...] which is disciplined, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production" (Marx, 2000: 953). In short, as Iñigo Carrera presents it, "the development of the productive forces of free labor immediately social as an attribute of its negation, that is, of private labor, is the contradiction that synthesizes the historical powers and the limit of the capitalist mode of production" (2013: 37-38).

The essential point of this approach is that the revolutionary political action of the working class arises as a necessity of capital to produce relative surplus value; that is, because capital needs to advance in the centralization of capital in order to produce surplus value, it needs to invest the working class with the capacity to organize in a fully conscious way the whole process of social production and, therefore, with the capacity to abolish it as the alienated subject of this same process. In other words, the process of socialization of labor that emerges as a necessity of capital, is carried out in the revolutionary political action of the working class. Thus, unlike the traditional

Marxist approach—which, by presenting economic development and revolutionary political action in an external link, necessarily falls into the dilemma of "economism" or "voluntarism"—this approach succeeds in presenting a consistent explanation of the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production as the product of both the development of capital and the revolutionary political action of the working class.

Conclusion

The first thing that jumps out at us in the analysis of the main positions presented in the debate on the collapse of capitalism is that no particular type of political action can be deduced from the conception adopted about the dynamics of capital accumulation. In fact, we have seen that authors of the most diverse political tendencies indistinctly fall into both sides of the debate regarding the possibility of the accumulation of capital to reproduce itself on its own basis. As we have already warned, this happens because all the authors participating in the debate have the same conception of the link between economic development and political action. For everyone, economic development takes place by itself, generating critical economic situations to which the political action of the working class is opposed. Thus, both are presented as self-constituted phenomena prior to their relationship and, therefore, externally linked. It is therefore entirely immaterial whether the political action of the working class is reformist or revolutionary, since in any case it does not derive from economic development. We have also seen that the final course of the debate — where, once this disconnect between economic development and the type of political action is evident, turns to a confrontation between the positions accused of being "economistic" or "voluntarist" — has the same limitations. Since the relationship between economic development and political action continues to be an external relationship, these positions can only fall permanently on both poles of this dilemma, without being able to overcome it; that is, they can never develop the role of one pole in overcoming capitalism without ending up negating the other. Specifically, if it is affirmed that the accumulation of capital leads by itself to the collapse of the system, then one falls into economism; and if one then maintains that the overcoming of capitalism depends on the political action of the working class in opposition to economic development, then one falls into voluntarism. What can never be done under this conception is to affirm both things at the same time.

In contrast to this way of approaching the question of the overcoming of capitalism, in the last part of this chapter we have seen that a methodologically grounded reading of the critique of political economy allows us to overcome the main dilemmas presented in the debate. This approach opposes, in the first place, a method of knowledge that "reproduces the internal life of the object" to be examined where the transition from one form to another passes through the development of the contradictions immanent in each form in question and, consequently, leaves no room for any kind of external link between economic development and political action. Second, it contrasts the recognition of capital as the subject of capitalist society and, consequently, the recognition of the action of individuals as the bearer of the reproduction of capital. In this way, the dilemma between "economism" and "voluntarism" is overcome as soon as it is recognized that affirming that the overcoming of capitalism depends on the development of capital accumulation implies affirming that capitalism is overcome through the revolutionary action of the working class.

Finally, attention has been drawn to the fact that the authors of the Marxist currents who recognize the importance of the dialectical method for the understanding of the critique of political economy, and of capital as the subject of society, do not, however, develop their arguments to the point of presenting the revolutionary action of the working class as a moment of the movement of

capital. Consequently, when these authors face the question of overcoming capitalism, they end up falling back on the same arguments that emerge from the debate on the collapse of capitalism. In contrast, and based on an approach recently developed in the specialized literature, the most salient points of the development that leads to the recognition of the revolutionary action of the working class as a moment in the development of the life cycle of capital have been synthetically presented.